

Korean EFL Learners' Perception of Intelligibility of English and the Effects of Teaching Prosody

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Gong, Jeong-Yeon. 2014. Korean EFL Learners' Perception of Intelligibility of English and the Effects of Teaching Prosody. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* 12, 17-30. This paper aims to find out what is the common perception of English speech among adult Korean learners and that of native speakers to Korean EFLs learners. Another goal is to examine previous L2 experiences among them and execute the prosody teaching. It will also be investigated if focusing on prosody can serve as effective learning strategies to build their fluency for the intelligibility. (Seoul National University)

Keywords: prosody, intelligibility, Korean EFL learners, supra segmental aspects, perception of English speech

1. Introduction

Over decades, English proficiency has been recognized as top priority in education, and the criteria in job application in Korea. Average Korean adults had more than 10 years of English education (to post secondary schools), and they often find out their lack of fluency especially in their speech. Having emphasized English proficiency so far, statistics surprisingly shows us that Korea is ranked 29th out of approximately 35 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation Development) members in TOEFL® speaking test. This contradicts the recent results of overall acquisition of learning among OECD countries. Korea is one of the top 3 countries at PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment of the OECD)¹. (Seokwoo Kim 2013)

¹ **PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment):** A triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15 year old students. To date, students representing more than

Also, it has the second largest number of TOEFL test takers among them. The findings bring curiosity about what made Korean EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners short of intelligibility in English speaking nevertheless their efforts for long time.

This paper aims to find out what is the common perception of English speech among adult Korean learners and that of native speakers to Korean EFLs learners. Another goal is to examine previous L2 experiences among them and execute the prosody teaching. It will also be investigated if focusing on prosody can serve as effective learning strategies to build their fluency for the intelligibility. Among the aspects of the prosody, the stronger determinants to the intelligibility will be identified. The term intelligibility was chosen in this paper, which is often used interchangeably or confoundingly with comprehensibility and interpretability.(Smith, Larry E., & Nelson, Cecil, 1985) Before moving on to the next passages, the three terms – intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability are classified by specific meanings as follows (Smith & Nelson, 1985):

- (1) Intelligibility: word/ utterance recognition,
- (2) Comprehensibility: word/ utterance meaning (illocutionary force)
- (3) Interpretability: meaning behind word/utterance (illocutionary force)

To assess solely the effect of L2 utterance, intelligibility was used in this paper. According to Larry and Cecil (1985), comprehensibility is used when the listener of the speech can paraphrase. And, the person should be able to translate the words spoken when it comes to interpretability.

This exemplary study would lead to a way to improve the Korean learners' speaking skills by examining effects of prosody teaching.

2. Review of Literature

As of pronunciation, researchers have paid very little attention to ESL students' own perception. (Tracey, Marian, 2002) As Tracey and Marian (2002) made research on adult ESL learners' perception, the vast majority of pronunciation problems identified by students were segmental. It is no wonder why ESL pronunciation resources have been focusing on L1-L2 segmental differences and the discrimination and articulation of individual sound segments in single syllable words. (e.g. Nilsen & Nilsen (1971)) It suggests that students might have experienced communication breakdowns, anxiety, stereotyping, and discrimination due to their poor pronunciation in specific segments (Morley, 1998). The emphasis on segmental aspects has somewhat shifted to prosodic aspects of pronunciation (e.g. Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Firth, 1992; Gilbert, 1993; Pennington & Richards, 1986), such as intonation, stress, rhythm, rate, and volume (Tracey, Marian 2002). Even so, very few studies have focused on the acquisition of more than one suprasegmental (Munro, 1995, Trofimovich 2005). Reports on ESL students from a variety of backgrounds have organized, but not specifically among the learners from the same origin. This motivated the study attempts to identify adult Korean EFL learners' perception of their L2 speech and which is stronger factor-segmental or suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation- as to the intelligibility. This provides a reason to specify which is more critical among the suprasegmental aspects regarding to the comprehensibility among the Korean adult learners. Also, as Peterson demonstrated pronunciation learning strategies and categorized them based on Oxford's strategy classification learning strategies for the system (2000), similar tactics will be used and analyzed to figure a the suitable acquisition of the English prosody.

3. The Study

The experiments of the current study fall into three parts. First of all, the adult EFL learners will be asked to read aloud passages of SPEAK®² as a pretest. Recordings of the speech will be distributed to both the Non-Native test takers (NNs) and the native speakers (NSs). After listening to the recordings, the NNSs will be asked to answer the perception of their own L2 speech and whether segmental or suprasegmental aspects of their pronunciation plays bigger role. Also, the NSs will be asked to answer that of the NNSs' speech. Further, treatments of teaching pronunciation focusing on prosody will be given to the participating NNSs. Lessons focusing on prosody will consist of different types of learning strategies based on parts of Oxford's strategy classification system. Other tests of SPEAK® will be given the participating NNS as the post test. (Different passages will be selected to eliminate effects of the repetition.). Finally, the pretest and post test recordings will be rated by NSs and this will be analyzed in comparison. This would benefit the effects of the prosody teaching more precisely.

4. Participants

48 adult Korean EFL learners will join in the interviews and treatments. To regulate gender and education variables, 24 males and 24 females who have tertiary education will be asked to participate. People with at least Bachelor's degree are selected because they are more likely to use English in their lives than those with more or less than secondary education in Korea. To rate the pretest and the posttest and to instruct prosody-focused lesson, 5 EFL teachers who are native speakers will

² **SPEAK® (Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit):** This assessment test is widely used by North American universities. The experiment of this study applied passages of this test due to the difficulty to find out the alternatives.

take part in.

5. Methodology

As Peterson and Susan (2000) did use categorization of Oxford's strategy classification system, the treatment of this study will be based upon it. Participants will read aloud SPEAK® test passages as a pretest of the treatment. At the same time, test takers will also be asked to choose what concerns them most in their L2 speech - language, pronunciation (suprasegments will be specified-word stress, rhythm, intonation, phrasing, rate), interlocutor, etc. Recordings of the pretest will be rated by 5 EFL teachers and both segmental and the prosodic features will be assessed. The prosodic criteria of the rating used were adapted from Adams (1979), Practor and Robinett (1985), and Wong (1987) as Janet, Ruth, and Kenneth did (1992). Then, one third of the test takers will get lessons and the other third will be left as a control group. Rate has added as one of the criteria since rate is commonly cited as a facilitating characteristic of Foreigner Talk(FT) (Tracey, 1990) even though the correlation of the rate and the intelligibility is debatable. Rating Scale was adapted from Adnerson -Hsieh, Janet (1992) and revised rating ranges from 0 to 4. Figure1 specifies the criteria and scale for rating prosody.

Figure 1. Criteria and scale for rating prosody (Revised from Adams(1979), Practor & Robinett(1985), and Wong(1987))

Prosodic Criteria

1. Stress	The correct syllables are stressed in words and appropriate words are accented in tone groups.
2. Rhythm	Stressed syllables are sufficiently prominent

	and occur at fairly regular intervals. Unstressed syllables and function words are sufficiently reduced.
3. Intonation	Intonation contours are appropriate and pith range is sufficiently wide
4. Phrasing	Phrasing and pausing are appropriate, with pauses occurring at syntactic boundaries
5. Rate	<i>Speech rate is appropriate enough to understand the message. Too slow or too fast rate will be considered not appropriate since the rate affects the quality of the overall pronunciation.</i>
6.Overall prosody	Overall, prosody is native-like.

Rating Scale



After the pre test, prosody teaching will be given by randomly organized three groups. Pronunciation learning tactics will be instructed to two groups among three. Each of the two will be given examples according to subcategorized learning strategies on Table 2.-1st group with the instructions on segmental aspects, 2nd group with that on supra segmental ones, and the rest will be the control group without instructions. Some strategies in Table 1 are not included in the subcategories because those tactics neither seem to be clear cut items nor applicable due to the characteristic of the instruction (e.g. The tactics in the social strategy group, 'Cooperating with peers', is not applicable since the instruction is the one-way from the teachers to the

participants).

Table 1. Pronunciation Learning Strategies (Based on Oxford, 1990, Peterson, 2000)

Oxford's Strategy Group	Pronunciation Learning Strategies	Pronunciation Learning Tactics(Previously documented tactics are italicized)
Memory	Representing sounds in memory	*making up songs or rhythms to remember how to pronounce words <i>*using phonetic symbols or one's own codes to remember how to pronounce something</i>
Cognitive	Practicing naturalistically	*trying to recall how a teacher pronounced something *trying to recall and immitate a teacher's mouth movements *listening to tapes/television/movies/music *concentrating intensely on pronunciation while speaking *speaking slowly to get the pronunciation right *noticing or trying out different TL dialects *mentally rehearsing how to say something before speaking *talking with others in the TL <i>*imitating a native speaker or teacher</i> <i>*talking aloud to oneself</i> <i>*talking silently to oneself</i>

		<i>*noticing mouth positions or watching lips</i> <i>*concentrating intensely on pronunciation while listening to the TL</i> <i>*trying to avoid producing inappropriate native language sounds</i> <i>*imitating the overall TL sound with native language words for fun</i>
	Formally practicing with sounds	<i>*pronouncing a difficult words over and over</i> <i>*practicing words using flash cards</i> <i>*practicing saying words slowly at first and then faster</i> <i>*memorizing and practicing TL phrases</i> <i>*repeating aloud after native speaker or teacher</i> <i>*repeating aloud after tapes</i> <i>*repeating aloud after television or a movie</i> <i>*repeating silently</i> <i>*reading aloud</i> <i>*doing exercises/practicing to acquire TL sounds</i> <i>*practicing sounds first in isolation and then in context</i>
	Analyzing the sound system	<i>*forming and using hypotheses about pronunciation rules</i> <i>*noticing contrasts between</i>

		native and TL pronunciation <i>*listening to pronunciation errors made by TL speakers speaking one's native language</i>
Compensation	Using proximal articulations	
Metacognitive	Finding out about TL pronunciation	<i>*acquiring a general knowledge of phonetics</i> <i>*reading reference materials about TL rules</i>
	Setting goals and objectives	<i>*deciding to focus one's learning on particular sounds</i> <i>*deciding to memorize the sounds (or the alphabet) right away</i> <i>*deciding to focus one's listening on particular sounds</i>
	Planning for a language task	<i>*preparing for an oral presentation by writing difficult-to-pronounce words very large in one's notes</i>
	Self evaluating	<i>*recording oneself to listen to one's pronunciation</i>
Affective	Using humor to lower anxiety	<i>*having a sense of humor about mispronunciations</i>
Social	Asking for help	<i>*asking someone else to correct one's pronunciation</i> <i>*asking someone else to pronounce something</i>
	Cooperating with peers	<i>*studying with someone else</i> <i>*studying or tutoring someone else</i>

Table 2. Subcategorization of pronunciation learning tactics

Segmental- focused (Group 1)	Prosody-focused (Group 2)
<i>*using phonetic symbols or one's own codes to remember how to pronounce something</i>	<i>*making up songs or rhythms to remember how to pronounce words</i>
<p>trying to recall how a teacher pronounced something</p> <p><i>*trying to recall and imitate a teacher's mouth movements</i></p> <p><i>*listening to tapes/television/movies/music</i></p> <p><i>*concentrating intensely on pronunciation while speaking</i></p> <p><i>*talking with others in the TL</i></p> <p><i>*imitating a native speaker or teacher</i></p> <p><i>*talking aloud to oneself</i></p> <p><i>*talking silently to oneself</i></p> <p><i>*noticing mouth positions or watching lips</i></p> <p><i>*concentrating intensely on pronunciation while listening to the TL</i></p> <p><i>*imitating the overall TL sound with native language words for fun</i></p>	<p><i>*listening to tapes/television/movies/music</i></p> <p><i>*speaking slowly to get the pronunciation right</i></p> <p><i>*talking with others in the TL</i></p> <p><i>*imitating a native speaker or teacher</i></p> <p><i>*talking aloud to oneself</i></p> <p><i>*talking silently to oneself</i></p> <p><i>*concentrating intensely on intonation, rhythm, rate, and word accent while listening to the TL</i></p> <p><i>*imitating the overall TL sound with native language words for fun</i></p>
<p><i>*pronouncing a difficult words over and over</i></p> <p><i>*practicing words using flash cards</i></p> <p><i>*repeating aloud after native speaker or teacher</i></p> <p><i>*repeating aloud after tapes</i></p> <p><i>*repeating aloud after television or a movie</i></p>	<p><i>*pronouncing a difficult words over and over</i></p> <p><i>*practicing words using flash cards</i></p> <p><i>*practicing saying words slowly at first and then faster</i></p> <p><i>*memorizing and practicing TL phrases</i></p> <p><i>*repeating aloud after native</i></p>

<i>*repeating aloud</i>	<i>speaker or teacher</i> <i>*repeating aloud after tapes</i> <i>*repeating aloud after television</i> <i>or a movie</i> <i>*repeating aloud</i>
<i>*forming and using hypotheses about pronunciation rules</i> <i>*noticing contrasts between native and TL pronunciation</i>	<i>*forming and using hypotheses about pronunciation rules</i> <i>*noticing contrasts between native and TL pronunciation</i>
<i>*forming and using hypotheses about pronunciation rules</i> <i>*noticing contrasts between native and TL pronunciation</i>	<i>*noticing contrasts between native and TL pronunciation</i>
<i>*acquiring a general knowledge of phonetics</i> <i>*reading reference materials about TL rules</i> <i>*deciding to focus one's learning on particular sounds</i> <i>*deciding to memorize the sounds (or the alphabet) right away</i> <i>*deciding to focus one's listening on particular sounds</i> <i>*deciding to focus one's learning on particular sounds</i> <i>*deciding to memorize the sounds (or the alphabet) right away</i> <i>*preparing for an oral presentation by writing difficult-to-pronounce words very large in one's notes</i> <i>*preparing for an oral presentation by writing difficult-to-pronounce words very large in one's notes</i> <i>*recording oneself to listen to one's pronunciation</i>	<i>*reading reference materials about TL rules</i> <i>*preparing for an oral presentation by writing difficult-to-pronounce words very large in one's notes</i> <i>*recording oneself to listen to one's pronunciation</i>

<i>*having a sense of humor about mispronunciations of segments</i>	<i>*having a sense of humor about mispronunciations of prosody</i>
<i>*asking someone else to correct one's specific pronunciation</i>	<i>*asking someone else to correct one's global pronunciation</i>
<i>*asking someone else to pronounce something</i>	<i>*asking someone else to pronounce something</i>

After the instructions focusing each aspect of pronunciation, post test (reading aloud SPEAK®) will also be given to all the participants. This is to analyze the effect of teaching prosody and segments of the pronunciation respectively. Test results will be rated and divided up to the 3 groups in the previous treatments. - 1st group with the instructions on segmental aspects, 2nd group with that on supra segmental ones, and the rest. Both the pre test and post test scores of the each group will be shown as mean scores. Also, coefficients of each aspect of prosody in relation to the overall rating will be analyzed. These would be beneficial to find out what would be the most critical factor of the L2 intelligibility among the supra segmental elements.

6. Conclusion

Many studies and instructions amplified teaching specific parts of pronunciation. The effect micro-focused training is questionable if the test result of the participants who have received instructions about stress, intonation, rhythm, etc. are more improved. And this means increased intelligibility of L2 speech of the EFL learners. In this sense, the tactics introduced in this study will help Korean adult EFL learners who have concerns about their own pronunciation.

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